

SPOTLIGHT

One day, during the gruesome Calcutta riot (1946), a curious boy escaped the strict surveillance of his *phupu* (paternal aunt), Salema Khatun. He went to Gorer Math, wandering alone on the streets. He witnessed strange happenings in a grocery shop – people of all ages were running off with different things. Despite not understanding what was happening, the kid joined them, picked up a bottle of soft drink and returned home. His *phupu* punished him severely. "This is called 'loot'," she cried – a lesson he would remember long after.

On the same day, he became familiar with the world and the reality of riots and murders. The brutal incident moved the young boy within. In a way, it changed his perception of the world forever. Several years later, the young, mischievous boy grew up to be one of the key figures of the cultural arena of Bangladesh – the iconic activist, Kamal Lohani.

While sharing his experience on the riot, Lohani says, "I learned so many things on that day. My *phupu* was a sensible school teacher and she opened my eyes."

Lohani was always a rebellious child. He first went to jail in 1953, when he and his comrades of the Bangladesh Student's Union, protested against the Muslim League Council and the visit of East Pakistan's Chief Minister Nurul Amin in Pabna. At that time, he was a student of the Government Edward College. "The blood spilled in Dhaka on February 21, 1952, had not yet dried," Lohani reminisces on the lives lost during the Language Movement. "The leader behind this notorious bloodshed, Nurul Amin had become a national traitor by 1953. So we protested and fought against supporters of the Muslim League."

During the protest, he stood on a table and gave his first speech, "I was not at all prepared, but somehow managed to deliver the speech," Lohani says with a broad smile.

He and his comrades succeeded in impeding the Muslim League Council and in return, the government jailed him for seven days. At this point in history, a legendary figure was born.

Today the octogenarian does not get much time to take a break. Even at this age, he is always busy with different cultural activities. Young people – in his words, "my young friends" – occupy his drawing room to enthusiastically learn about the history of Bangladesh – gems that one will never find in a text book.

Back in the 50s, at Edward College, Kamal Lohani discovered his two loves – Karl Marx and his wife-to-be, Syeda Dipti Rani. Political campaigning and movement bound the two young hearts and they lived as one soul till she breathed her last in 2007.

In 1955, when the martial law was declared, Lohani was arrested with many other student activists. It was the beginning of a new phase in his life at the Rajshahi Central Jail. He was in the

same place where the infamous Khapra Ward killing took place (on April 24, 1950, firing by the police took lives of seven communist revolutionaries in Khapra Ward, Rajshahi Central Jail). Prison life had a profound effect on his political outlook in his later life.

In prison, senior communist politicians gave him a regular duty. "Every day I translated news from two English dailies – The Statesman of Calcutta and the Pakistan Observer," he says. "This is how news was imprinted in my very soul. You can say I learnt journalism in prison." This experience helped him to get his first job in the daily Millat in 1955.

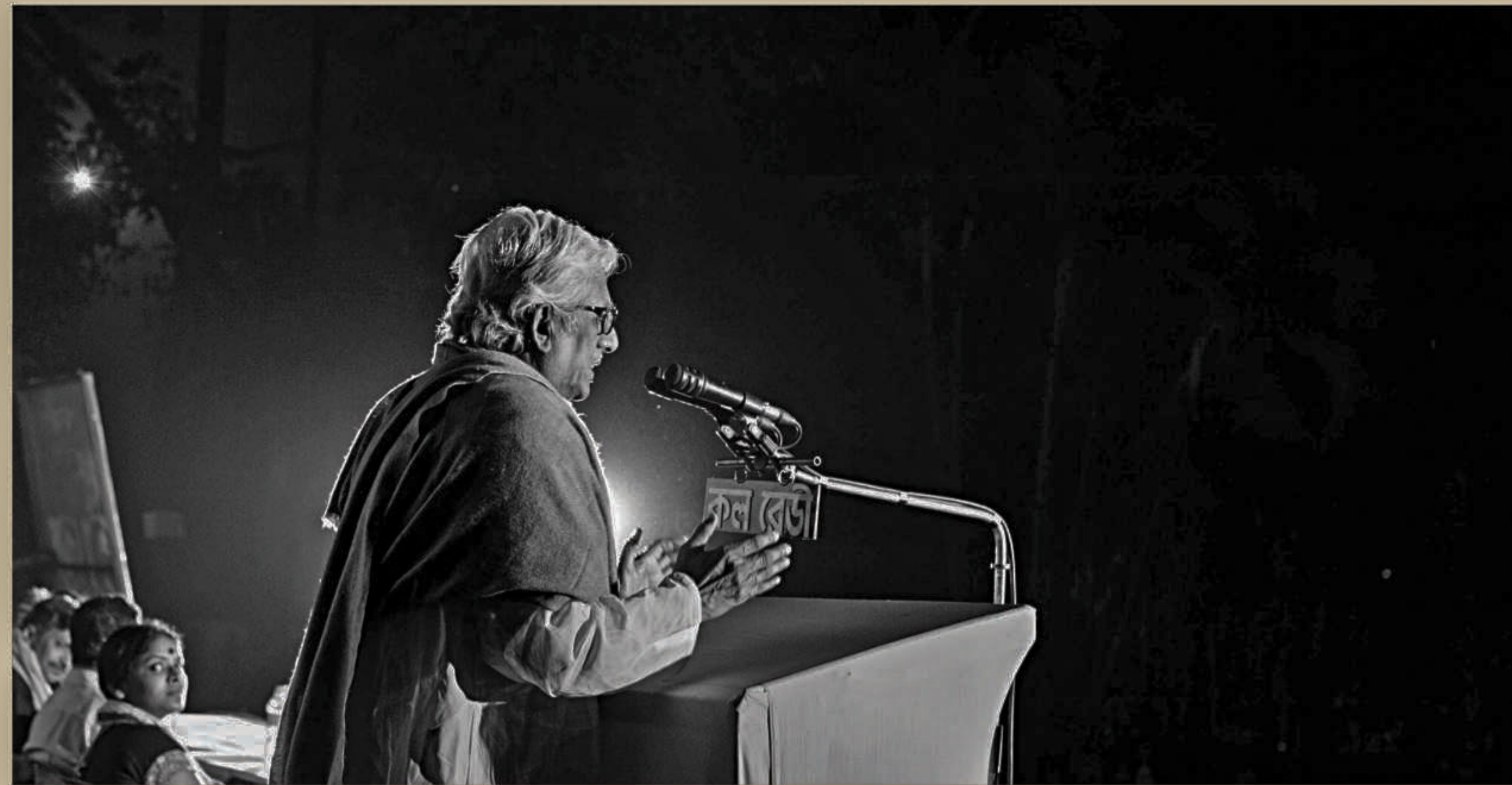
His family was against his political involvement and requested him to complete his education. Upon his return home, after nearly one and a half years of imprisonment, Lohani's family members tried hard to persuade him to continue with his studies. But he had made up his

# THE SONG OF THE SEA

## RECOLLECTING THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION OF BANGLADESH.

ANANTA YUSUF

PHOTOS: FAMILY ALBUM



Inauguration of Chhayanaut Sangeet Bidyaton.

KAMAL LOHANI WORKED FOR ALMOST EVERY REPUTED NEWSPAPER IN THE COUNTRY, FORMED A LEFT CULTURAL FRONTIER – KRANTI IN 1967 AND PLAYED A LEADING ROLE IN ALMOST ALL THE CULTURAL AND POLITICAL PROGRAMMES ARRANGED IN THE 60s.

mind, "I took my intermediate (HSC) exams from prison. But failed," he says. "I believed that I had to be involved in politics. Marxism was running through my blood like fire," he explains about his tenacious decision to continue with politics.

Within a few days, Lohani left his home and came to Dhaka alone. He worked for almost every reputed newspaper in the country, went against the government's decision and celebrated the Rabindra Centennial in 1961, joined as a secretary at Chhayanaut in 1962, formed a left cultural frontier – Kranti in 1967 and played a leading role in almost all the cultural and political programmes arranged in the 60s.

In 1960, he got married to his political comrade, cousin and love Dipti Rani. Eventually, he became father to two daughters and a son.

In one of Dipti Lohani's writings, "Amar Chokhe Kamal Lohani", she proudly states that her husband never bowed his head before any unethical means; he always held his head high



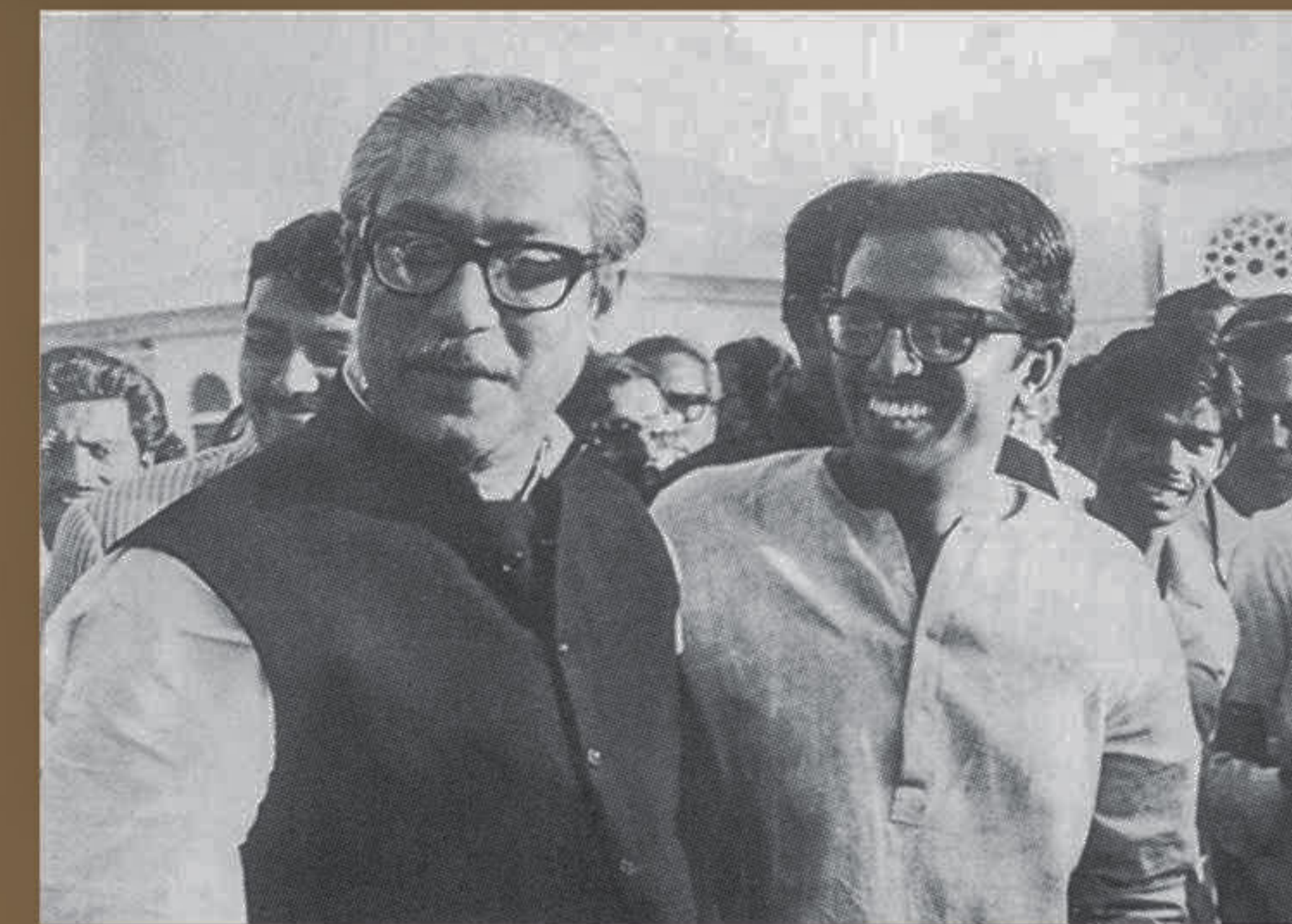
Bangladesh Betar, celebrating Ekushey February in 1972. From left, MR Akhtar Mukul, Kamal Lohani, Ashfaqur Rahman Khan.

with pride and dignity. "A sea of people was joining Bakshal," she writes. "He was a man that moved against the popular current." Kamal Lohani loved

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman but didn't believe in Bangabandhu's one party political theory.

During the war, he worked as the news editor of Shwadhin Bangla Betarkendra. "I was in charge of the news desk, but my work was not confined to collecting and reading news," he says. They had to run any work that was required at that moment. "Our workstation at Baliganj Circular Road was not fancy. Rather, it was a small stuffy room. The recording studio was not soundproof, which is why many of the recordings had a lot of noise from the outside."

For him, each and every day working with the Shwadhin Bangla Betar Kendra was historically significant. From the early hours of December 16, 1971, those working for the radio started to sense impending victory. "We had received orders to play victory songs and circulate triumphant slogans," says Lohani. "I am fortunate that I was entitled with the responsibility of writing and reading the news bulletin on our victory."



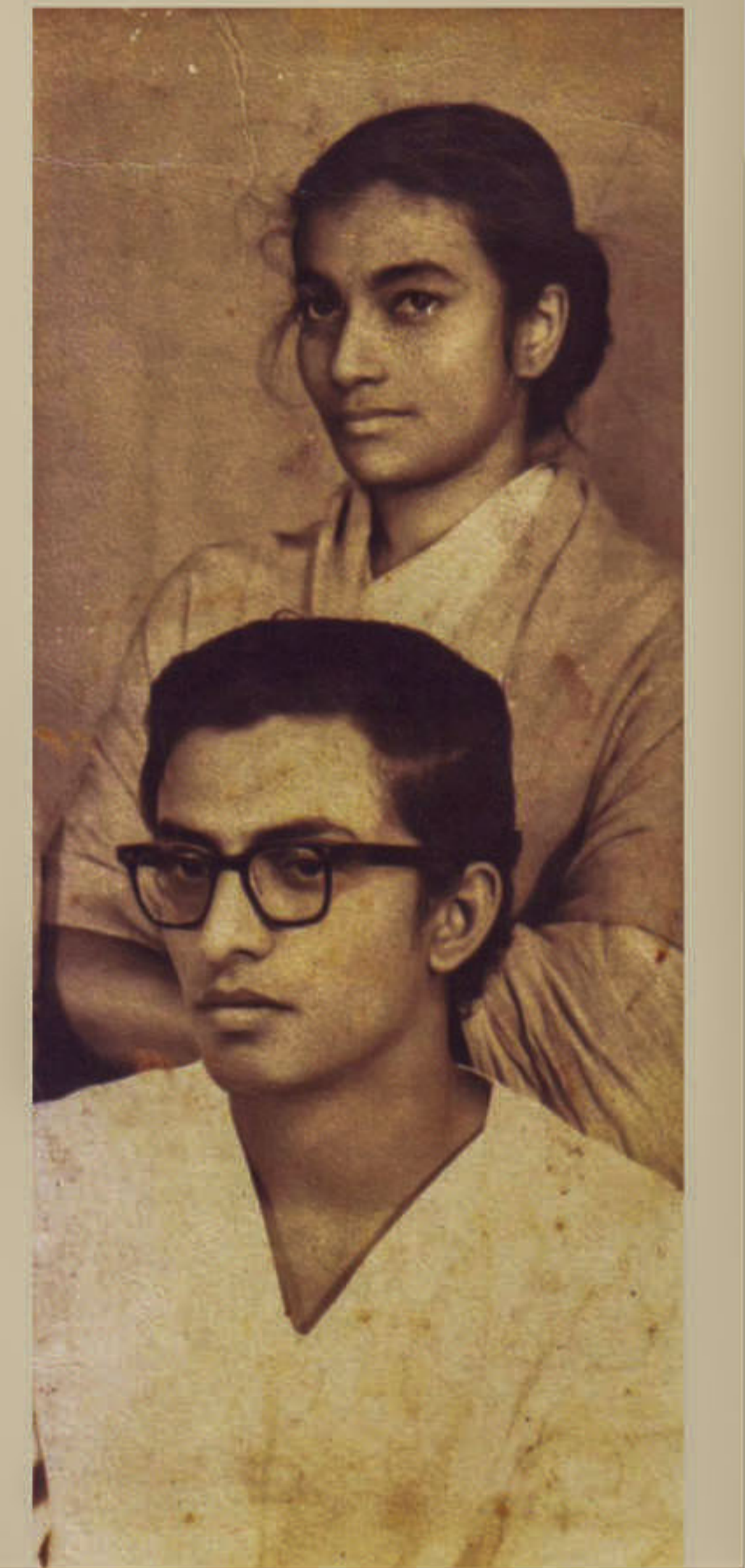
With Bangabandhu celebrating the second independence day, 1973



Performing in a popular dance drama *Nakshi Kanthar Math*.

The '1 Minute News Bulletin' had only two sentences in it, he remembers. The first sentence began with cursing the Pakistani armed forces, moving on to "we won the battle". The statement following was about the Pakistani army surrendering their arms and weapons.

The government paid its respect to Kamal Lohani when he was awarded the Ekushey Padak in 2015. On his 81st birthday, it's now our turn to show our gratitude to the man whose words and activism inspired millions to survive and emerge victorious against the genocide of 1971. ■



With his wife Dipti Lohani (1960).



From left: Begum Sofia Kamal, Jahanara Imam, Utpal Dutt and Kamal Lohani (April 1972).